

Prescription Drug Abuse in the Workplace

Illicit drugs and misuse of alcohol are not the only substances that can affect health and safety in workplaces. Prescription drugs, when used without a prescription and without the supervision of a doctor, can also have adverse effects. Workers can become sleepy or anxious or depressed or confused, from the improper use of prescription drugs. As important, when these drugs are used improperly, they can pose risks to employees, their coworkers, and the overall workplace itself. The risks associated with nonmedical use of prescription drugs in workplaces can escalate when workers' jobs require caution and safety to prevent injury, such as those of transportation workers, assembly line workers, construction workers, nuclear-power plant workers, and the like.

What Is Prescription Drug Abuse?

Prescription drug abuse has been identified as a growing problem in American workplaces. In the *National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH)*, SAMHSA defines prescription drug abuse as the use of prescription pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, or sedatives without a prescription of the respondent's own or simply for the experience or feeling the drug causes.

This definition covers a wide range of behaviors, from misusing prescription medications to get high, stay awake, or get to sleep to using someone else's medication to address a legitimate medical need. What may seem like a harmless sharing of medications can lead to addiction, misdiagnosis of illnesses, life-threatening circumstances, and death.

Are Prescription Drugs Safe?

Prescription drugs are safe when they are taken as directed under a doctor's orders. Fear of addiction and dependence should not stop an individual from taking medications that can help treat his or her problems, nor prevent a physician from prescribing appropriate medications. Proper usage of prescription drugs can help workers protect their health and thus perform more productively in the workplace. However, when taken for nonmedical or recreational purposes, prescription drugs are no safer than illicit or street drugs. The misconception of prescription drugs as legal and "safe," even when abused, is particularly strong among young adults.¹

Prescription drugs are safe when taken as directed under a doctor's orders and as dispensed.

Most prescription drug abusers obtain their drugs free from a friend or relative. In 2006, 55.7 percent of individuals 12 and older who had used pain relievers nonmedically in the previous 12 months said they got their drugs this way.² Other ways of acquiring prescription drugs include "doctor shopping" to get multiple prescriptions, taking them from a friend or relative, or buying them from a friend, relative, or dealer.³ It appears that the Internet is not a significant source of prescription drugs, such as opioid analgesics, for most users.⁴

Prescription Drug Abuse Is a Growing Problem

Multiple sources of data make it clear that this problem is a growing one, especially for teens and young adults, which means that employers need to be aware of the problem. Data from the Treatment Episode Data Set show that admissions for treatment of prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) drug abuse rose from 3 percent of all admissions in 1999 to 4 percent in 2002. The escalation seems to come from increased rates of abuse of narcotic painkillers, which more than doubled between 1992 and 2002. As of 2003, 3 percent of admissions were for abuse of nonheroin opiates.⁵ According to the Drug Abuse

In 2008 there were 2.5 million persons age 12 or older who had used psychotherapeutics nonmedically for the first time within the past year. This averages out to around 7,000 initiates per day.

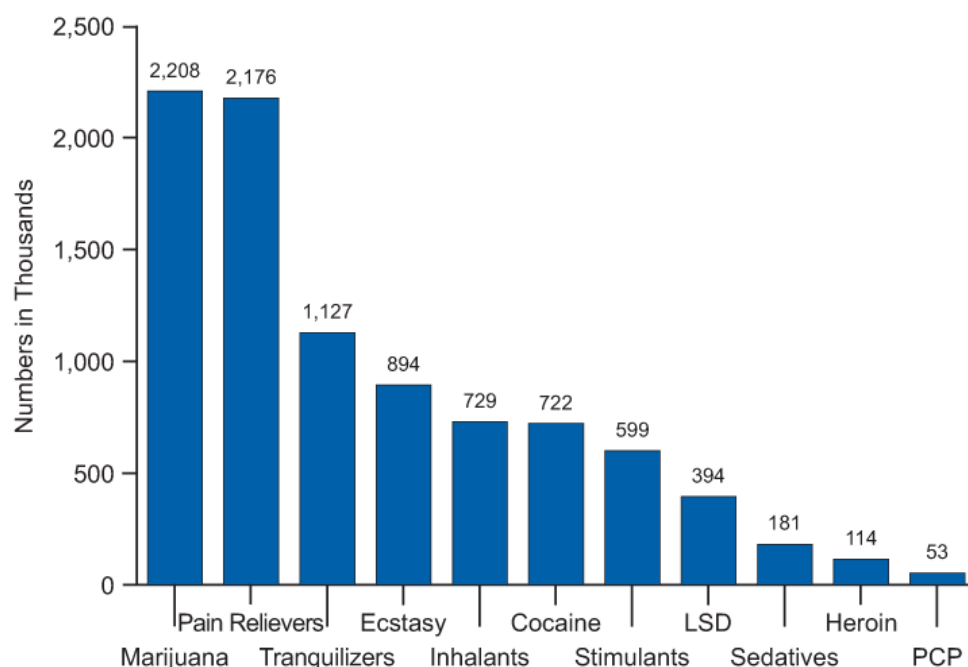
In 2008 the average age at first nonmedical use of any psychotherapeutics among recent initiates ages 12 to 49 was 22.0 years (SAMHSA, 2009).

Warning Network, from 1994 to 2001, emergency room visits for narcotic prescription pain relievers increased for oxycodone 352 percent, methadone 230 percent, morphine 210 percent, and hydrocodone 131 percent.⁶ Of the 1.3 million visits to emergency departments in 2004, a half million involved nonmedical use of pharmaceuticals.⁷ In drug tests among the U.S. workforce, positive results for amphetamine use remained relatively stable from 2004 to 2008, in marked contrast to significant declines in positive testing results for other drugs, such as methamphetamines and cocaine.⁸

The *NSDUH* data show that, based on combined data for 2002, 2003, and 2004, an annual average of 14.8 million persons 12 or older had misused prescription psychotherapeutic drugs in the past year. Nonmedical use of prescription pain relievers was second only to marijuana use among the Nation's most prevalent illicit drug behaviors.⁹

In a study of prescription drug abuse among street-based sex workers, data indicated that about one third of the workers acquired these drugs through street purchases, calling attention to the existing black market in prescription opioids.¹⁰

Past-Year Initiates for Specific Illicit Drugs Among Persons Age 12 or Older, 2008



Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2009). *Results From the 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings* (Office of Applied Studies, NSDUH Series H-36, HHS Publication No. SMA 09-4434). Rockville, Maryland.

Young Workers at Increased Risk

Teens and young adults are using prescription drugs for recreation in growing numbers. Nonmedical use of prescription drugs increased among young adults (ages 18–25) from 5.4 percent in 2002 to 6.4 percent (2.1 million individuals) in 2006, largely because of an increase in the nonmedical use of pain relievers,¹¹ although the rate decreased in 2008 to 5.9 percent.¹² The highest rates of use are found among

The highest rates of nonmedical use of prescription drugs are among young adults, ages 18 to 25. In 2008, 5.9 percent of young adult respondents surveyed for the National Survey on Drug Use and Health reported using prescription drugs for nonmedical purposes.

those age 18–25 (14.5 percent), compared with teens 12–17 (9.1 percent) and adults (4.4 percent).¹³

From 2002 to 2008, the rate of nonmedical use of prescription drugs dropped among youth age 12 to 17 from 4.0 percent to 2.9 percent.¹⁴ Still, teens abuse prescription drugs more than any other illicit drug, except marijuana,¹⁵ and there are nearly as many new abusers (initiates) 12 and older of pain relievers as there are for marijuana.¹⁶ Prescription drugs are the drug of choice for 12- to 13-year-olds.¹⁷ If these young workers also consume alcohol, the earlier they started drinking increases their risk of prescription drugs misuse as adolescents and young adults.¹⁸

Among street-based sex workers, one of the few populations of workers studied, data indicate that prescription drug abuse is more prevalent among those with shorter sex-work involvement—that is, among those who are generally younger.¹⁹

Prescription Drug Abuse in the Healthcare Workforce

Although workers in any profession can abuse prescription drugs, the problem has been most studied among healthcare professionals—especially physicians. Most data on this issue are at least a decade old, but what information is available suggests that prevalence rates of substance use and abuse among healthcare professions resemble rates in the general population, although healthcare workers have higher rates of abuse with benzodiazepines and opiates. Such specialties as anesthesia, emergency medicine, and psychiatry have higher rates of drug abuse. Some reasons suggested for this higher rate include job stress, the baseline personalities of providers in these specialties, and easy access to drugs. An increased recognition of the need to address the addiction issues of healthcare workers has led to the growing availability of institutional, local, and statewide impaired-physician programs and the establishment of programs designed to treat impaired professionals on the part of organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers, the American Psychological Association, and Nurses in Recovery. Overall recovery rates appear to be higher for healthcare professionals than for other groups.²⁰

Drugs Most Commonly Abused

Stimulants, which are used to treat sleep disorder narcolepsy and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, include methylphenidate and amphetamines. These medications increase levels in the brain of dopamine, which is a chemical associated with pleasure, movement, and attention. Misuse of stimulants can lead to a rapid increase in dopamine, producing euphoria and the risk of addiction. Stimulants are sometimes abused for “performance enhancement” (e.g., weight loss, better focus, increased attention), as well as to get high. These drugs can decrease sleep and appetite, which can lead to malnutrition and increase blood pressure, heart rate, and body temperature, which can lead to serious cardiovascular complications such as stroke. Abuse can also lead to paranoia and feelings of hostility.²¹

Opioids, more commonly known as painkillers or prescription narcotics, include morphine, codeine, and oxycodone. These drugs can cause feelings of euphoria or a high. Some users alter the method of ingestion to intensify these feelings (e.g., snorting or injecting OxyContin). Since these drugs can depress respiration, even a large single dose can be dangerous. Mixing opioids with other substances that depress the central nervous system (such as alcohol or antihistamines) is equally risky since it increases the risk of respiratory depression.²²

Central nervous system (CNS) depressants are used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders and include barbiturates and benzodiazepines. These drugs slow normal brain function, producing a calming effect. The body quickly adapts to some of these drugs, thus requiring greater doses to achieve the same effect. It is dangerous to suddenly stop taking these drugs, which can lead to seizures and other harmful side effects. CNS depressants should not be combined with other CNS depressants (such as alcohol), since together they can slow the heart and respiration to the point of death.²³

When workers misuse prescription drugs in combination with other drugs or alcohol, they can suffer dangerous health consequences and even death.

Prevention Strategies

There are some simple steps you can take to help prevent this type of drug abuse:

- Take medications as directed.
- Consult your doctor before increasing or decreasing doses.
- Don't crush or break pills.
- Know about the interaction of your medication with other drugs, including alcohol and OTC medications.
- Inform your doctor about past substance use.
- Don't share or borrow pills.
- Securely store and count pills (many teens/young adults get their drugs from the family medicine cabinet).
- To dispose of unused medications, mix them with an undesirable substance (e.g., used kitty litter, coffee grounds) in a sealed container or return to an authorized take-back program.²⁴

Treatment Is Available

Like other chronic diseases, addiction—a disease of the brain—can be treated. Usually, treatment includes detoxification and drug treatment or behavioral interventions—or a combination of these. Detoxification is a process of supervised withdrawal from a drug; it is often the first step in a drug treatment program. Behavioral treatments may include individual therapy, group counseling, contingency management, or cognitive behavioral therapy, each of which helps individuals learn how to handle situations that may trigger cravings or use and how to handle relapse. Drug or pharmacological treatments can be used to counter the effects of the drug on the brain, relieve withdrawal symptoms, and overcome cravings.

No single treatment is appropriate for all individuals. Frequently multiple treatment rounds may be needed for an individual to fully recover.

Related Links

If you're interested in learning more about this topic, here are some helpful resources:

- NIDA Research Report: "Prescription Drugs: Abuse and Addiction," <http://www.nida.nih.gov/ResearchReports/Prescription/prescription.html>
 - "Misuse of Prescription Drugs," <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/prescription/TOC.htm>
- "Prescription for Danger: A Report on the Troubling Trend of Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drug Abuse Among the Nation's Teens," http://www.theantidrug.com/pdfs/prescription_report.pdf

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